

Education is at the forefront in Hartford this year – the governor, the legislature, and commentators of all stripes are putting forward their remedies for Connecticut’s devastating achievement gap. In many of our communities, however, the question of closing the achievement gap and making sure all students are coming out of our schools well prepared for the rest of their lives is, and has been, a challenge we have faced for decades. This is not new for us. You may not hear from our struggling children and parents very often, but we are here, and here to say: change must come. Now.

We know that Connecticut is becoming increasingly diverse, and we also know that achievement for low-income students, students of color, and English Language Learners is low and stalling. As Connecticut looks to embrace a future full of job growth and economic development in new fields, we cannot afford to write off these students any longer.

LPRAC just held its Result Based Accountability (RBA) session on education Monday, March 19 at Wesleyan University. We examined the decreasing graduation rates of Latino and English Language Learner (ELL) students, the negative impact of institutionalized racism and the lack of cultural competence in educating a diverse student population, and the relationship between the attainment gap, college persistence and graduation rates and future earning potential.

Parents, students, and teachers have known this for years. We are all attempting to get by in a system that is fundamentally dysfunctional. The system has not adapted to the state’s changing demographics, whether racial or economic. We can either choose to say “well too bad if you don’t learn this way, your loss” – or we can acknowledge that the loss will be all of ours to bear. There is no more time to wait around and hope that the system we inherited will suddenly, magically, begin to function for all of our students.

That’s why the spark that Governor Malloy has infused into the system this year is so exciting. We have long needed a shock to the system. The blame game that dominates the conversation about public education is not productive and is certainly not going to result in better outcomes for students.

Governor Malloy’s proposed reforms, and the reforms I hope the Education Committee will continue to hold strong to, will go far to help our struggling communities. They will help more of our students’ access high quality early education, which is such an important start to a school life. They will allow local communities to create new schools that actually meet the needs of our students – and can deliver high quality learning experiences no matter what they walk in the door with. Imagine a new neighborhood school on the south side of Hartford that has a particular focus on students who are working to learn English. They will turn around the most broken of our public schools, so that we no longer have to somehow justify sending students to these failing schools year after year after year. No more will poverty, or being an English Language Learner, be an excuse for students not learning. We know that there are great schools in Connecticut that do away with excuses and help all students learn – now, we have to make sure all kids get those opportunities.

These proposals will help create a new system from the ground up where students are thriving not in spite of, because of, the schools we send them to. We must address these systemic issues first, and that’s what these proposals do. Sometimes it is hard to see exactly how state policies will benefit those on the ground, but I believe that this is the right focus at a moment when we know just changing around the things that are most tangible isn’t getting the job done.

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